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Conservative mover, shaker silent before panel

By Rita McWilliams
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Robert Owen, a conservative activist whose business card was found in the rebel supply plane downed by Marxist Sandinistas in Nicaragua, yesterday invoked his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination before the Senate panel investigating the Iran-Contras covert operation.

Mr. Owen is reported to have helped arrange contacts between the Nicaraguan resistance and private individuals who wanted to help them and then reported the contacts to Marine Lt. Col. Oliver North, the National Security Council aidefired for allegedly masterminding the Iran-Contras operation.

Mr. Owen, who appeared only briefly before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, became the third person to take the Fifth. Col. North and President Reagan's former national security adviser, Vice Adm. John Poindexter, did so earlier.

A former State Department consultant who helped in the distribution of the \$27 million in humanistic aid approved by Congress in 1986, Mr. Owen has denied privately he was involved in any arms shipments to the rebels or any illegal activities concerning the Contras.

Mr. Owen is the vice president and staff director of the Institute on Terrorism and Sub-National Conflicts and a former aide to Sen. Dan Quayle, Indiana Republican.

Leonard Greenbaum, Mr. Owen's attorney, said his client declined to testify because "we have not had

much time to talk to him. The picture is complex and cloudy." Mr. Greenbaum said the question of requesting immunity from prosecution "has not come up."

Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American af-

fairs, spent more than two hours before the committee yesterday, and several Central Intelligence Agency employees appeared before the panel, apparently to testify about their knowledge of Swiss bank accounts used in the operation.

Mr. Abrams told reporters he would "cooperate in every way possible" to "supply some of the details" of "U.S. policy and how we carry it out."

Emerging from the hearing, Mr. Abrams said he believed the controversy would not hurt the Reagan administration's efforts to fund the Nicaraguan resistance.

"All of the reasons that Congress approved Contra aid to begin with... continue to be true and they have to be faced," Mr. Abrams said. "I have not seen any indication that anybody who voted for us last time... is going to vote against. I know of no vote switches."

He believes any attempt to block using the remaining \$60 million of the \$100 million rebel aid package Congress approved earlier this year would fail.

CIA Director William Casey will be called back to testify before the committee, perhaps under oath, because some of his testimony last week was not accurate the chairman of the panel said. But Sen. David Durenberger left open the possibility Mr. Casey may not have been fully informed when he testified.

The Minnesota Republican said he believed some Cabinet members were aware of the Iran arms dealings and ignored it.

"I don't think any of them who were aware did anything other than turn their backs on it, pretend that it wasn't going on, and now they are all scrambling around to do their own investigations," Mr. Durenberger said. "They should have been doing that from January on in the interest

of the president's role in foreign policy.

"Everybody who was in on the decision chose to pretend this was an NSC operation and they went about their own business and sort of ignored, I think deliberately ignored what was going on. I don't think that well served the policy or the presidency," Mr. Durenberger said.

But Sen. David Boren, the Oklahoma Democrat who will become chairman of the panel in January, disagreed. Mr. Boren said once some Cabinet-level officials said they opposed the sales, the NSC staff went ahead without their approval.

"There seemed to be this inclination that, 'Well, we know they're opposed. Let's just go ahead and run this operation and not particularly involve them,'" Mr. Boren said.

Meanwhile, White House spokesman Larry Speakes said yesterday he noted various calls for President Reagan to summon Vice Adm. John Poindexter and Col. North to the Oval Office and ask them to tell him, as their commander-in-chief, exactly what happened.

"As to calling Ollie and Poindexter to the Oval Office, I think we might be accused of the fox guarding the hen house. The president has instigated investigations on three fronts to tell all."

Mr. Durenberger said committee staffers had to resort to some "rather creative subpoena-serving" over the weekend because there was "some effort on the part of some people to avoid" them.

• Jeremiah O'Leary contributed to this report.